

Ocmulgee Mounds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

Ocmulgee Mounds NHP



The Mississippian Period 900-1200 CE



MACON PLATEAU CULTURE

Around 900 CE a group of newcomers arrived in central Georgia, pushing out the existing culture of Woodland Indians and establishing various settlements. Archeologists call these people Mississippians because their way of life is thought to have originated in the region we now know as the Mississippi River Valley. The Mississippians constructed a large ceremonial complex and town on the Macon Plateau near the Ocmulgee River at present-day Macon, Georgia. They left no written records, but archaeologists excavated an abundant collection of artifacts that help explain the life and culture of this society.



(“LITTLE MAN”, A WATER BOTTLE STOPPER FROM THE MISSISSIPPIAN CULTURE)

The ceremonial complex, still visible today, is only a portion of the “Macon Plateau” culture. Six miles away the Early Mississippians built another large village, and several smaller sites once existed near the Ocmulgee River’s Fall Line, where the natural resources of the hilly Piedmont and flatter Coastal Plain overlap.

MOUNDS AND BUILDINGS

Earth mounds represent the most visible, and for some people the most intriguing, evidence of the Mississippian culture. The mounds served various purposes including acting as massive platforms. The platform mounds tended to be flat-topped pyramidal structures with ramps for easier access to the summit. Wooden buildings atop the mounds functioned as homes, temples, storage facilities, etc. Most of the mounds in the Ocmulgee complex were created in stages, increasing the size of the mounds over years of occupation.

Not all mounds served as platforms. The Funeral Mound, as its name suggests, contains more than 100 burials. Some were complex log tombs, a few contained elaborate copper and shell ornaments suggesting high status, but most were simple pits with no accompanying artifacts. The Mississippians built more than just mounds. Excavations uncovered several

earth lodges, the most elaborate of which has been reconstructed. The 1,000-year-old floor contains a bench with 47 molded seats and a bird-shaped platform with three additional seats. The Earth lodge would have been used by important members of society to either discuss politics or perform ceremonies, or perhaps a combination of both.



(MISSISSIPPIAN EARTH LODGE)

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The extensive mound construction suggests that the Mississippians had a complex social structure. A strong leader would be necessary in order to

carry out the planning and execution of building projects. The prominence of the temple mound also implies a strong religious component to the society. Some

SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL
ORGANIZATION
(CONTINUED)

archaeologists speculate that Mississippian society was organized into “chiefdoms”, which consisted of several towns. Each

town had a chief, perhaps subservient to a more powerful Priest-Chief.

SUBSISTENCE

The people of the Macon Plateau town were sedentary farmers. They carried out extensive cultivation using tools of wood, bone and stone. Major crops included squash, pumpkins, sunflowers, and tobacco, but predominantly corn and beans. They stored excess food in baskets and pottery, and the surplus allowed them to devote time to other aspects of life.

The Mississippians hunted to supplement their diet, concentrating on small game such as raccoon, turkey, rabbit, beaver, squirrel, turtles, and deer. No part of the animal would be wasted – skins were tanned to make clothing, bone became jewelry, fishhooks, and projectile points.



(MISSISSIPPIAN AGRICULTURE)

Hunters used several techniques to find game, but the bow and arrow was essential for a successful hunt.

ARTISTIC
EXPRESSIONS

The art of the Mississippians can be seen in the items of everyday life. Women constructed pots by coiling and modeling local clays. The early Mississippian pottery was made in many sizes and shapes suited to a variety of everyday and ceremonial uses. They preferred plain surfaces, but the elegant and sometimes complex forms of the pottery reveal skill and beauty. Occasionally effigies decorated the pots. Women wove baskets and fabrics as well, personalizing them with various

designs. Mississippians also found the time to make objects with which to adorn themselves. Stone, wood, bone, shell and other materials were probably utilized, but unfortunately, organic material does not survive well in the moist, acidic soil of the southeast. Based on evidence from other archaeology sites and upon historic accounts of the Native Americans, people decorated themselves with shell gorgets, beads, tattooing, paint, elaborate hairdos, feathers and many types of ear ornaments.

RECREATION

Mississippians played a game called “Chunkey.” A player rolled a disc-shaped stone across the ground while other players threw their spears at it. The player whose spear landed closest to where the disc stopped became the winner. The Mississippians also played a ball game very similar to the modern game of lacrosse. Two opposing teams used wooden racquets to throw a small leather ball down a large playing field and tried to score by tossing the ball between two vertical posts at each end of the field. The ball game was usually played between two rival towns and

sometimes was a method of settling arguments.



(RECREATION FIELD IN A MISSISSIPPIAN TOWN)

DECLINE OF
THE MACON
PLATEAU
CULTURE

By 1200, the town on the Macon Plateau was no longer a center of Mississippian culture. The people may have migrated elsewhere or have been assimilated by those who originally inhabited the area. Mississippian culture continued to thrive at places like Etowah in Northern Georgia, Moundville in Alabama, and Spiro, Oklahoma.

By 1350, a late Mississippian town was

established about 2 ½ miles down the Ocmulgee River from the Macon Plateau at a site known today as Lamar. The inhabitants built two earthen mounds, one encircled by a unique spiral ramp, the only one of its kind still known to exist in this country. The site lends its name to a widespread late Mississippian southeastern culture, and is also protected as a separate unit of Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park.